



Built to Last

No. 7

Gayety Theatre

405 East Baltimore Street, Baltimore (1905-6, J.B. McElfatrick & Sons, architects)

Excerpt from the full report written by Laurie Ossman, Ph.D., for HABS

The Gayety Theatre is the oldest remaining burlesque theater in Baltimore. The elaborate ornament of the Gayety façade typifies the exuberance of turn-of-the-20th-century theater design as a sub-genre, in this case drawing on both Baroque and Art Nouveau ornament for its eye-catching and fanciful decorative vocabulary.

The Gayety is the venerable keystone of a district referred to locally as “The Block,” and known for its adult entertainment. “The Block” is somewhat of a misnomer, as the area of arcades, bars, burlesque houses and adult bookshops extended east along Baltimore Street from Calvert Street for approximately eight blocks in the middle third of the 20th century. Due to various cultural forces, and particularly to a concerted “anti-smut” campaign during the mayoral tenure of William Donald Schaefer in the early 1980s, most of this extensive commercial sub-cultural landscape no longer exists, and “the Block” is, in fact, a singular representative of a once-thriving red-light district.

Rising commercial rents in the heart of Baltimore’s central business district during the late 19th century spurred substantial relocation of Baltimore Street’s retail and other shops west to Howard Street—an area previously dominated by wholesale outlets. The Great Fire of 1904 accelerated this trend, as retail tenants opted to move to existing space elsewhere



Gayety Theatre from the northeast. James W. Rosenthal, photographer, Summer 2001.

in the city rather than to await rebuilding in the so-called burnt district. The major financial institutions affected by the fire generally announced rebuilding plans within months as if to reassure clients that the institutions—if not the structures that housed them—remained impervious to the devastation. The Gayety, as it turns out, was built on the former site of *The German Correspondent* newspaper, indicating that the press could not wait for the construction of new quarters in the burnt district. The lots formerly occupied by the newspapers along Baltimore Street were sold to new owners for new uses.

Although many legitimate theaters and vaudeville houses were built in the Howard Street vicinity after the Great Fire, some—like The Gayety, Lubin’s Nickelodeon and Vaudeville “duplex” directly across the street, The Victoria (later known as The Embassy) and The Rivoli—remained in the area and defined this stretch of Baltimore Street as a “popular entertainment” center, with an emphasis on burlesque and vaudeville. This did not, perforce, mean that the financial district hit the skids after the 1904 Fire: Despite the connotations acquired later, burlesque and vaudeville were mainstream forms of entertainment aimed at the working and middle classes.

(continued on page 2)

sThe Gayety was certainly not the most prestigious theater in Baltimore, but its ornamental audacity suggested an assertion of its status as the pre-eminent theater of its type (i.e. burlesque) in the city. That such a “low-culture” genre should receive such elaborate treatment stands as evidence of the prolific (and competitive) performing arts culture that thrived in the city at the turn of the 20th century.

By World War I, the Gayety’s neighbors had made the switch to showing movies. In the 1920s and 1930s, cinema began to supplant burlesque and, especially, vaudeville as the chief form of low-cost popular entertainment across the United States. Burlesque houses, such as The Gayety, promoted more risqué acts in the effort to give the public something that they couldn’t get in movies, especially after the adoption of the Hayes production code in 1932, which not only banned nudity but placed Draconian restrictions on sexual content and references in film. Nostalgic descriptions of performances at The Gayety and its peers indicate that, by today’s standards, the performances were quite modest. However, the aura of taboo was a large part of what sustained burlesque in general, and The Gayety in particular, through the mid-20th century.

From its heyday in the 1910s and 1920s—when The Gayety’s bill included nationally prominent comedians such as Abbott and Costello, Phil Silvers, Jackie Gleason and Red Skelton—the Gayety was a “top-of-the-line” burlesque house. In this period (just before and after World War II) iconic strippers such as Gypsy Rose Lee, Blaze Starr, Sally Rand, Valerie Parks and Ann Corio performed there. Following the Second World War, major banking and commercial institutions in need of additional office space often relocated or shifted their major operations to the new civic center along Charles Street.

Upscale retail either moved to Howard Street or, later, out of the city altogether, to suburban shopping centers and malls. More arcades, as well as adult bookshops, peep shows and show bars cropped up to fill in the vacant spaces and gradually redefined East Baltimore Street as a “red light district,” analogous to New York’s Times Square, Washington, DC’s 14th Street and New Orleans’s legendary Bourbon Street. By the 1960s, The Gayety no longer hosted headline performers, and local news features surrounding the cataclysmic fire in 1969 tended to emphasize nostalgia for its decline. In this sense, The Gayety Theater Building encapsulates the history of burlesque as an entertainment form and its interaction with civic form in the 20th century United States.

The Gayety’s façade (the only remaining element of the historic structure) is a particularly lavish version of the 19th-century burlesque theater sub-genre. The burlesque theater evolved from European Opera House models by way of the music hall type (as opposed to a civic meeting house type for legitimate theaters in much of the United States throughout the 19th century) likely because associations of slightly louche European cosmopolitanism were part of the image burlesque hoped to project. In addition, the building of many major opera houses in Europe in the latter half of the 19th drew on the Baroque for inspiration, and the Baroque Revival Style permitted for a free application of exuberant ornament atop a loosely classical shell and tectonic vocabulary. The classicism provided for grandeur and simplicity of form, while the ornamental opportunities might allow the building’s façade to act as a three-dimensional marquee, advertising sumptuous escapist entertainments within. In addition, the ease with which Baroque Revival ornament elided into Art Nouveau, with its anthropomorphic (and predominantly female) decorative vocabu-

lary made it an apt choice for houses, such as The Gayety, for which the animate female form was one of the major attractions.

The complete report for this structure, including bibliographic citations and references, may be obtained from the Historic American Buildings Survey beginning in September 2002. Copies of this information sheet may be downloaded at no cost from the HABS web site:

www.cr.nps.gov/habsbaer/habs/

During the summer of 2001, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland Historical Trust, in coordination with the City of Baltimore’s Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation (CHAP) and Preservation Maryland, recorded ten historic buildings and sites within Baltimore’s Central Business District through large-format photography and original historical research. The heart of the downtown area and focus of intensive redevelopment efforts, Baltimore’s Central Business District is a designated city historic district and home to a diverse array of historic commercial and civic buildings, churches, theaters and other landmarks. Many of them predate the district’s Great Fire of 1904 and chronicle Baltimore’s rise as a financial, commercial and civic center. This project, resulting in more than 150 photographs by Baltimore photographer James W. Rosenthal for HABS and ten detailed architectural histories by Laurie Ossman, PhD., also a Baltimore resident, grew out of concern about the recent loss of the Merchants & Miners Transportation Company Building at 17 Light Street and other buildings of architectural distinction in Baltimore.

Ranging chronologically from the Peale Museum (1814) to the Bank of America Building (1929; formerly the Baltimore Trust Company Building), and in function from Old St. Paul’s Church (1846) to the Gayety Theatre (1906), the ten landmarks selected for this study illustrate the architectural diversity of the district and the myriad forces that have informed the district’s growth and evolution over time. The exhibit, launched at the Maryland Historical Society in May 2002 during National Historic Preservation Month, and the companion walking tour provide a glimpse into the architectural history of Baltimore’s Central Business District. It is hoped that the exhibit and brochure will encourage further exploration and preservation of Baltimore’s tremendously rich architectural heritage.